

VZCZCXRO8556  
OO RUEHFL RUEHKW RUEHLA RUEHNP RUEHROV RUEHSR  
DE RUEHSI #2411/01 3521444  
ZNY CCCCC ZZH  
O 171444Z DEC 08  
FM AMEMBASSY TBILISI  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 0586  
INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TBILISI 002411

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/16/2018

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [AR](#) [GG](#)

SUBJECT: GEORGIA: ARMENIAN NORASHEN CHURCH - CONCERNS  
CONTINUE THOUGH RENOVATIONS HAVE STOPPED

Classified By: Ambassador John F. Tefft for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: The latest in a series of disputes between the Armenian Apostolic Church (AAC) and the Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC) ignited November 18 when a construction crew using a bulldozer, hired by a Georgian Orthodox priest, moved the headstones of several Armenian graves at Norashen Church in old town Tbilisi. The Georgian priest told emboffs he was merely trying to clean up the church courtyard, which is next to a Georgian Orthodox Church. The Armenia community, however, has expressed serious concern, especially regarding the moving of headstones which they termed "desecration." The Armenian community had also expressed concern in June regarding the encircling of both the Georgian and Norashen church by a fence, again constructed by the same Georgian Orthodox priest and displaying a St. Nino's Cross. Both the Georgian and Armenia priests involved have confirmed that after the initial complaint, the bulldozer was removed and that all gravestones were returned to their original locations. During a December 9 visit to Tbilisi to discuss the regional economy, Armenian Prime Minister Sargsyan discussed the Norashen Church issue with Georgian President Saakashvili and Prime Minister Mgaloblishvili, as well as visited the church with his Georgian counterpart. In press statements, the two prime ministers stressed the historical ties between the two churches, as well as supported an idea to foster dialogue between the two religions. End Summary.

¶2. (U) The Norashen Church, located on Leselidze Street in Old Town of Tbilisi, is currently unoccupied. Adjoining the Norashen church is a Georgian church. There is a long running dispute between the two churches over the GOC's construction of a fence around Norashen that encloses it together with the smaller neighboring Georgian church. Georgian church officials characterize their efforts as sprucing up the area, by erecting a fence to keep out derelicts, planting flowers and hiring a company with a bulldozer to cart off piles of leaves and trash. Armenian Church officials see these efforts as an attempt to "Georgianize" a church which is rightfully theirs, with each of these steps as part of a larger political move to marginalize them. Emboffs have visited the site: the fence displays a large Christian cross and a St. Nino's cross. It is visible that the gravestones have been moved, and a large pile of rubble remains sitting on top of one of the graves. Although Armenian Church officials have expressed concern that the fence may eventually be used to deter their entry, Emboffs found there were at least three separate entrances, all unlocked. To date, there is no barrier to visiting the Norashen Church.

¶3. (C) Armenian Prime Minister Tigran Sargsyan visited Tbilisi on December 9 to participate in the seventh session of the Armenian-Georgian Intergovernmental Commission for Economic Cooperation. He raised the issue of the Norashen church with both PM Mgaloblishvili and President Saakashvili, as well as paid a visit to the church. In a joint press conference, the two prime ministers stressed that the Armenian and Georgian churches are linked by centuries-old friendly ties. They emphasized the importance of the

initiative of the Patriarch of the Georgian Orthodox Church to form a joint commission to discuss issues connected with Norashen and other Armenian churches, where all problems will be discussed and addressed via dialogue. Armenian Priest Qbe discussed and addressed via dialogue. Armenian Priest Narek Kushyan told Emboffs that the AAC has been patient, but unless there is resolution of the issues surrounding the Norashen Church, there is concern that parishioners, who are angered by GOC actions, may resort to violence. Public officials, such as the Ombudsman, who have spoken out in support of finding resolution of Armenian Church issues have been painted as "anti-church" and "anti-Georgian." The Orthodox Church has very strong support among Georgians, and therefore, the Saakashvili administration has, as a matter course, a close relationship with the church. However, the government is reluctant to speak out against the church as it could result in a significant political backlash against the government, something the GOG does not want to risk.

14. (C) The latest incident reflects underlying tensions over the law on church registration in Georgia and the return of disputed churches between the AAC and GOC. President Saakashvili and the Orthodox Patriarch signed a Concordat in 2005 which gave the Georgian Orthodox Church special legal status. Other churches in Georgia may register as a union or a foundation and receive tax exempt status, but cannot register as a church. For the AAC and some other faiths, including Lutherans and Muslims, this is unacceptable and they remain unregistered (septel). The Roman Catholic Church has decided to register partially; it has registered its charitable organizations as an NGO called "the Association of Saint Joseph." The Ambassador regularly raises this issue with senior Georgian Government officials and the Patriarch,

TBILISI 00002411 002 OF 002

and will do so again before year's end (to be reported septel).  
TEFFT